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ABSTRACT

Recent research has noted the importance of being able to correctly interpret social situations in order to respond appropriately in social interactions. This study examined whether social perception--accurate awareness of peers' perceptions--is a global trait or a context-specific ability. Specifically, the study examined individual differences in children's overall accuracy of social perception. Subjects were 175 public school students in grades 1 through 5. Each child completed three tasks evaluating same-sex classmates: positive sociometric nominations (three children you "like best"); sociometric ratings (on a six-point scale, ranging from "like very much" to "like very little"); and Revised Class Play (RCP) behavior nomination (nominating same-sex peers that best fit each of 30 behavior descriptions). To assess the children's awareness of their peers' perceptions of them, the children also were given a perspective-taking version of each of these measures, on which they indicated, for example, who might nominate them and what rating they might receive. Results of analyses indicated that older children and females scored higher on overall accuracy than other children, regardless of sociometric status or behavioral profile. There were no differences among children in their overall accuracy of social awareness based on either their sociometric status or their scores on the RCP scale. Findings suggest that social perception does not develop as a single ability, but should be examined with regard to specific domains or contexts. Contains 10 references. (Author/HTH)

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Overall Accuracy of Children's Awareness of Peer Perceptions

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Abstract

Subjects were 175 first through fifth grade students attending a public elementary school. Each child completed three tasks evaluating same-sex classmates: a) positive sociometric nominations (three children you "like best"); sociometric ratings of each classmate along a six-point scale ranging from "like very much" to "like very little;" c) Revised Class Play (RCP) behavior nomination technique nominating same-sex peers that best fit each of 30 behavior descriptions. To assess the children's awareness of their peers' perceptions of them, the children also were given a perspective taking version of each of these measures (i.e., Who do you think nominated you?; What rating do you think each of these people gave you?; Who do you think would nominate you for each of these roles?). To assess accuracy of awareness of peer perceptions, a signal detection analysis was applied to the two versions (standard and perspective taking) of each measure. An overall mean d' score was calculated from all of the individual d' scores which then served as the dependent variable in a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Older children and females scored higher on overall accuracy than other children, regardless of sociometric status or behavioral profile.

Purpose

Recently, researchers in the areas of both children's (Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986) and adults' (Curtis & Miller, 1986; Kenny & Albright, 1987; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993) social cognition have focused on the importance of being able to correctly interpret social situations in order to respond appropriately in social interactions. It is important to be able to infer other people's thoughts in order to know, for example, how to join a group of peers, how to respond to ambiguous social cues, and how to provide informative social feedback to others. The question of whether social perception is a global trait or a domain-specific characteristic has yet to be answered.

Accurate information about the perceptions of specific peers may lead people to respond in ways which serve to maintain other people's positive or negative perceptions of them. Popular status children, in general, seem to be more aware of the subtleties of social situations than other children. Thus, it might be expected that popular children would be the most socially aware and would be most accurate in their estimate of their peers' perceptions of them across a number of dimensions. At the same time, the large number of social inadequacies shown by rejected children might also suggest that they are the least aware of how they are perceived by their peers.

On the other hand, previous research (MacDonald & Cohen, in press) has shown that accuracy of awareness of liking and disliking by specific peers was related to children's sociometric status. Similarly, MacDonald (1993) found that awareness of specific peer perceptions of three behavior categories (Sociable-Leadership, Aggressive-Disruptive, Sensitive-Isolated) was related to the number of nominations received for these categories. The present research addresses the question of whether social perception is a global trait or a context-specific ability by examining individual differences in children's overall (or global) accuracy of social perception.

Method

Subjects were 175 first through fifth grade students attending a public elementary school. Each child completed three tasks evaluating same-sex classmates: a) positive sociometric nominations (three children you "like best"); sociometric ratings of each classmate along a six-point scale ranging from "like very much" to "like very little;" c) Revised Class Play (RCP) behavior nomination technique (Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985) nominating same-sex peers that best fit each of 30 behavior descriptions. To assess the children's awareness of their peers' perceptions of them, the children also were given a perspective taking version of each of these measures (i.e., Who do you think nominated you?; What rating do you think each of these people gave you?; Who do you think would nominate you for each of these roles?).

For each of the perspective taking versions, the format was kept identical to the original questionnaire. On the perspective taking versions of the sociometric nomination and RCP tasks the child was allowed to choose as many classmates as they thought would choose them for that item. Similarly, children were allowed to use unlimited numbers of "1" ratings to indicate which of their classmates would give them "1" ratings.

Results

To assess accuracy of awareness of peer perceptions, a signal detection analysis was applied to the two versions (standard and perspective taking) of each measure. Signal detection and d' take are based on the joint mutual perceptions of the children and allowed us to examine the accuracy of an individual's beliefs about specific peers. This measure takes into account differences in group size, as well as response biases.

Signal detection analyses yielded a d' score for each child for peer liking (nominations), a d' score for each child for peer disliking ("1" ratings), and a d' score for each child for each item on the RCP. The d' score for nominations and the d' score for ratings served as measures of the accuracy of children's perceptions of which peers like them and which peers dislike them, respectively. For the RCP items, a mean d' score for each child for each of this measure's three subscales (Sociable-Leadership (SL), Aggressive-Disruptive (AD), Sensitive-Isolated(SI)) was calculated. The mean d' scores for these three types of behavior served as measures of the accuracy of each child's awareness of their peers' perceptions of them in terms of each of these behaviors.

Correlations

A series of Pearson correlations were performed on the accuracy variables (Liking Accuracy, Disliking Accuracy, SL Accuracy, AD Accuracy, and SI Accuracy), peer liking (standardized numbers of positive nominations received), peer disliking (standardized numbers of low ratings received), SL, AD, SI, gender, and grade. All significant correlations are presented in Table 1.

In looking at the five accuracy scores (liking, disliking, Sociable-Leadership, Aggressive-Disruptive, and Sensitive-Isolated), there were few statistically significant intercorrelations. Liking Accuracy and SL Accuracy were positively correlated ($r = .22$, $p < .01$). AD Accuracy and SI Accuracy were also positively correlated ($r = .21$, $p < .01$).

Some of the correlations were not unexpected, based on previous research which found that sociometric status and accuracy with regard to peer liking and disliking were related. Here, Liking Accuracy and Peer Liking were positively correlated, as were Disliking Accuracy and Peer Disliking. It has also been found that number of nominations for a particular behavior subscale also predicted accuracy with regard to peer perceptions in terms of that category of behavior. Here, SL Accuracy and SL were positively correlated, as were AD Accuracy and AD.

Table 1

Intercorrelations Among Accuracy Measures, Peer Perceptions, and Descriptive Variables (N = 164)

	Liking Accuracy	Disliking Accuracy	SL Accuracy	AD Accuracy	SI Accuracy
Liking Accuracy	------				
Disliking Accuracy		------			
SL Accuracy	.22**		------		
AD Accuracy				------	
SI Accuracy			.13+	.22**	------
Peer Liking	.19*	-.14+			
Peer Disliking	-.29***	.33***			
SL	.15+	-.13+	.23**		
AD	-.17*	.30***	-.14+	.26***	
SI	-.28***	.23**	-.16*		
Gender	-.16*				
Grade	.20**			.14+	.18*

+p<.10. *p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

(table continues)

Table 1 (cont.)

	Peer Liking	Peer Disliking	SL	AD	SI
Liking Accuracy					
Disliking Accuracy					
SL Accuracy					
AD Accuracy					
SI Accuracy					
Peer Liking	------				
Peer Disliking	-.45***	------			
SL	.55***	-.44***	------		
AD		.43***	-.23**	------	
SI	-.42***	.56***	-.32***	.17*	------
Gender					
Grade					

$^{+}p<.10$. $^{*}p<.05$. $^{**}p<.01$. $^{***}p<.001$.

Multiple Regression Analysis

An overall mean d' score was calculated from all of the individual d' scores. This overall mean d' was used as a measure of overall accuracy of peer perceptions and served as the dependent variable in a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Children in each classroom were assigned to five sociometric status groups (Popular, Rejected, Neglected, Controversial, and Average) using the method developed by Asher and Dodge (1986). Sociometric status was effect coded and entered into the regression equation in the first step, along with standardized RCP subscale scores (SL, AD, SI). The equation was nonsignificant at this point. Grade and Gender were entered into the equation on the second step and the equation became significant, $R^2 = .16$, $F(9, 154) = 3.23$, $p < .01$. Both Grade and Gender were both significant predictors of overall accuracy ($t(163) = 3.38$, $p < .001$, and $t(163) = 2.29$, $p < .05$, respectively). These variables accounted for a significant portion of the variance over and above that accounted for by Sociometric Status and RCP scores. Older children and females scored higher on overall accuracy than other children, regardless of sociometric status or behavioral profile.

Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Overall Accuracy of Peer Perceptions (N = 164)

Variable	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
Sociometric Status	----	----	----
SL	.06	.05	.11
AD	.06	.05	.10
SI	-.04	.05	-.06
Step 2			
Grade	.09	.03	.25***
Gender	.09	.04	.17*

Note. Sociometric Status was entered in the form of effect coded vectors. $R^2 = .07$ ($p = .09$) for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .08$ ($p < .001$) for Step 2.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

Summary and Conclusions

In this study, we found evidence for the existence of both individual differences (due to gender) and developmental trends in accuracy of social perception. Yet Kenny and Albright (1987) suggested that individual differences in accuracy in adults are small. The gender difference was not totally unexpected. Bukowski, Sippola, Gauze, Hoza, & Newcomb (1993) suggested that girls may be more sensitive to the relational ties between themselves and their peers, which may explain their greater accuracy of global social perception. The grade finding is supported by Selman's (1971) work which suggested that after age nine children become more sophisticated in assuming other's cognitive and social perspectives. Thus, this advancement in perspective taking might underlie children's awareness of peer evaluations.

There were no differences among children in their overall accuracy of social awareness based on either their sociometric status on their scores on the RCP subscales. This finding, along with those of previous research, (MacDonald, 1993; MacDonald & Cohen, in press) suggests that social perception does not develop as a single ability, but should be examined with regard to specific domains or contexts. It appears that while individual differences in accuracy of social perception in adults may be small, this is not the case for children, who are still in the process of developing these skills.

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